

FROM OUR READERS

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The Four Virtues

I HAVE a question about the article “Buddhist Concept for Today’s Living (1)—The Four Virtues of the Buddha: Breaking out of the lesser self,” in the January 1999 issue of *Living Buddhism* [pp. 8–9].

In summary, the “four virtues” of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth are True Self, Eternity, Happiness, and Purity (November 1992 *Seikyo Times*, pp. 8-11), whereas the “three virtues” of the Buddha are Parent, Teacher, Sovereign (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 1, p. 90). In 1264, Nichiren Daishonin explained that only Shakyamuni was endowed with the three virtues (MW-6, 22). He also explained that other Buddhas, such as Amida and Yakushi were not endowed with these three virtues (MW-6, 22).

I have found no reference [in the *Major Writings*] to a Buddha endowed with the “four” virtues of True Self, Eternity, Happiness and Purity, and no reference to a set of four virtues of a Buddha.

On page 8 of the article in the January issue there is the statement that Mahayana Buddhism views the four virtues of True Self, Eternity, Happiness, and Purity as the four virtues of the Buddha. Is there a text or reference to support this statement? The Lotus Sutra, a Mahayana text, presents Bodhisattvas Jogyo, Jyogyo, Muhengyo, and Anryugyo to embody these four virtues, rather than a Buddha to embody these virtues.

The article suggests that Nichiren Daishonin attributes the four virtues of the Buddha to the four leaders of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth. In which text or reference did Nichiren Daishonin refer to these four virtues of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth as being virtues of a Buddha?

There is an incredible amount of praise for the Bodhisattvas of the Earth in the Major Writings, in the Lotus Sutra and in the writings of President Ikeda. Nichiren Daishonin claims that no one but the Bodhisattvas of the Earth could appear to propagate Nam-myoho-renge-kyo (MW-1, 90), whereas he could have claimed that Buddhas could accomplish this. There are several descriptions explaining that the heritage of the ultimate law of life was transferred to the Bodhisattvas of the Earth, whereas the Daishonin could have said that it was transferred to a Buddha. Instead, he praises the Bodhisattvas of the Earth thoroughly.

In conclusion, the four virtues of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth should not be attributed to any Buddha(s). To automatically assume that Buddhas are praiseworthy, and that Bodhisattvas can be a bit praiseworthy after-the-fact is to treat the Bodhisattvas of the Earth in a condescending manner.

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As you suggest, Nichiren Daishonin attributes the four virtues of true self, eternity, happiness and purity to the four leaders of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth in “The Record of Orally Transmitted Teachings” (Gosho Zenshu, p. 751). The same passage describes “the actions of the essential bodhisattvas [i.e., the Bodhisattvas of the Earth]” as “Nam-myoho-renge-kyo” and their function as “leading all people of Japan to the pure land of Eagle Peak” (Ibid.). In other words, here and elsewhere the Daishonin equates the function of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth to that of Buddhas—those who manifest the Law of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo in their lives and thereby lead others to happiness.

In addition, in his writing “The Fourteen Slanders,” the Daishonin states: “All Buddhas and bodhisattvas will be present in complete joy, caressed by the breezes of eternity, happiness, true self and purity” (MW-3, 217). Here the Daishonin associates the four virtues with both Buddhas and bodhisattvas.

Attributing the four virtues to a Buddha or to Buddhas in general is appropriate and accords with the Daishonin’s meaning.

I think it is safe to say that any Buddha who is real—who is a human being living in this world and who manifests his or her innate Buddha nature—manifests these four virtues. This is what we mean when we refer in general to “a Buddha” in our study articles. Amida and others do not fit this description. The Daishonin describes Amida as follows:

Amida Buddha dwells in a region ten billion Buddha lands away and has not the slightest connection with this saha world. However one may claim [that such a connection exists], there is no basis for it. It is like trying to mate a horse with an ox, or a monkey with a dog! (MW-6, 102)

We can interpret the above to mean that Buddhas such as Amida are no more than god-like images with no connection to the real world—not real persons. Since the four virtues are very real qualities—real potentials within human life—only a real person could possibly manifest them.

It is best to view the four virtues as a function of a person’s emerging Buddha nature—also, an expression of that person’s identity or function as a Bodhisattva of the Earth.

—J.K.